

FOREWORD

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First Interview with Adam Yarmolinsky - 11 November 1964

Kennedy Oral History Project Daniel Ellsberg, Interviewer

Interviewer: Adam, can you tell us something about when and how you became associated with Kennedy. I believe it was during the campaign.

YARMOLINSKY: It was during the campaign, after the Los Angeles convention. Before the convention, I had been in touch with Harris Wofford, who was an assistant to Senator Kennedy at the time. I had known Harris for a number of years, and he had suggested that I might become involved in the campaign even before the convention. I was practicing law then and consulting for philanthropic foundations, and I had indicated an interest; but in fact no meeting was arranged with the Senator. It wasn't until after Los Angeles, sometime in early August I think, that Harris got hold of me and I agreed to become involved in the campaign on a volunteer basis. The first thing that I did, as I recall, was to write a speech for Senator Kennedy in the foreign policy area. I'm puzzled, I don't recall whether it was a speech for Senator Kennedy or possibly a speech for Chester Bowles concerning the Kennedy foreign policy record. It was based on the collection of speeches in the foreign policy area which either had been published or was about to be published. Immediately thereafter, I was involved in the Civil Rights part of the campaign. Within the first few days after that began, in the course of my first meeting with Sargent Shriver who was overseeing both the Civil Rights and other parts of the campaign effort, we got to talking about urban affairs. As I recall, I volunteered in effect to put together an urban affairs unit for the campaign. After preparing a memorandum, I met with Shriver on it, we went ahead with it. The

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Perhaps we should move backward to the episode that took place just before the SKYBOLT affair, namely, the Cuban crisis.

YARMOLINSKY: I don't know what I can contribute on the Cuban crisis. I heard about it from McNamara, the morning after the discovery was made.

ELLSBERG: The photographs were taken on Sunday, October 14, and they were interpreted on Monday, October 15. McNamara was told Monday evening.

YARMOLINSKY: I think I was told Tuesday morning.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember the occasion?

YARMOLINSKY: Well I happened to be in McNamara's office and he was rushing off to the White House. He indicated that there was trouble.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember his tone, his words?

YARMOLINSKY: No. He was gravely concerned.

ELLSBERG: To put this in perspective, can you remember occasions when you would say you had seen commotion expressed by McNamara over international events?

YARMOLINSKY: Well I suppose this was the point at which there was the gravest concern. I didn't talk to him about Cuba, except afterwards, and he was greatly distressed about the failure of the Administration to handle the thing properly, but this was more in retrospect. The point at which he was most concerned was after Major Anderson had been shot down, and just before the next round, the last round of messages.

ELLSBERG: That's very interesting.

YARMOLINSKY: He felt that either the Russians were not getting the signals, or they were deciding to escalate.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember his initial reaction regarding US policy when the missiles were discovered?

YARMOLINSKY: I do not.

ELLSBERG: Was it you who told me that his first reaction was that it was a mistake for Kennedy to have made the public commitment?

YARMOLINSKY: This was an early reaction but I don't remember how early.

ELLSBERG: I think you said it was the first thing you remember him saying when he told you about the missiles. However, now he is reported by some to have had the attitude earlier that these missiles constituted no particular additional threat to the US.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: It is reported that he felt it really was not urgent for the US to move to get them out of there.

YARMOLINSKY: As a military threat, that's right. It was political, not military.

ELLSBERG: Right. What was his feeling on the political side?

YARMOLINSKY: I think he felt that particularly because of the President's commitment, the installation of these missiles presented a political problem that we had to deal with.

ELLSBERG: This still allows for the possibility of dealing with them in ways that would leave them there in the end. Did he feel that it was almost an essential, politically, to get them out?

YARMOLINSKY: I think so, but I doubt that he had a closed mind on it.

ELLSBERG: After the first day he told you about them, did he discuss with you the deliberations that were going on that subsequent week, before the affair was over?

YARMOLINSKY: Only in fragmentary fashion. He did, a little; Gilpatric did, a little; as I was involved in various fact-finding.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember Gilpatric's attitude?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I think Gilpatric was more or less following the McNamara line, not taking an independent position.

ELLSBERG: Incidentally, in studying the Cuban crisis I found that among high-level staff people there was a strong impression that McNamara had been in favor of doing nothing. I discovered that all this seemed to be based on the opinion that they constituted no military threat.

YARMOLINSKY: That's very shallow.

ELLSBERG: I think it was simply inferred from that, that he was in favor of doing nothing.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: There is no evidence as to what he was proposing on the policy side. Of course, it wouldn't follow at all that he meant to do nothing.

YARMOLINSKY: That's right.

ELLSBERG: I suspect by the way that the attitude of the President and Bobby Kennedy was the same, that they didn't constitute a military threat.

YARMOLINSKY: In fact, I don't think they did constitute a military threat.

ELLSBERG: I think that's a pretty sound position. When did you get some assignments in that connection?

YARMOLINSKY: I think within 24 hours he designated John McLaughlin and me as his counsels, and we had a number of specific assignments, such as preparing memoranda. The assignment that I remember being designated

was defining the quarantine zone. I don't know whether it was John or I who came up with the notion of the two circles, one in Havana and one on the two ends of Cuba.

ELLSBERG: Then later, as I remember, you were dealing with the problem of extending the blockade of Cuba, were you not? I remember we had a frantic day, when crowds of people were coming into your office and briefing you on the effects of the petroleum blockade.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, that's right. We prepared a paper on what would be the consequences of extending the blockade other than in missiles.

ELLSBERG: Can you remember anything during the week of what you saw of the evolving attitudes or expectations of any of the principals?

YARMOLINSKY: I know that there was great concern among the military being directed in this extraordinary degree of detail by civilians. There was a good deal of resentment, particularly by Admiral Anderson.

ELLSBERG: Did you really hear any of the inside?

YARMOLINSKY: Only secondhand.

ELLSBERG: Did you have an impression at various points as to how McNamara or Giipatric thought it was going to come out? ;

YARMOLINSKY: I think they were reasonably confident until Major Anderson was shot down.

ELLSBERG: Were you reading the letters from Khrushchev as they came in?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Had you read the Friday night letter dated October 26th? Do you remember when you read it?

YARMOLINSKY: I can't sort them out.

ELLSBERG: It was a long letter in which he suggested that if we were to give a guarantee of non-invasion of Cuba, there would no longer be any necessity for the missiles in Cuba.

YARMOLINSKY: And that was followed by a letter on Saturday morning in which he sort of took back what he offered on Friday.

ELLSBERG: He suggested that there be a trade for missiles in Turkey:

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember discussion of the Turkish missile trade earlier on?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: We had been expecting that offer earlier.

YARMOLINSKY: It was particularly ironic because we planned to take them out anyway.

ELLSBERG: Yes. Did you hear anything of the President's attitude on that? He was apparently very irritated that they were not already out.

YARMOLINSKY: No, I don't remember hearing that.

ELLSBERG: At any rate the Friday night letter probably generated a good deal of optimism.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember the events of Saturday which involved first a meeting of the EXCOM to discuss the Friday night letter, which was hopeful. In the course of that meeting, they received two very disturbing pieces of information: the Saturday morning letter mentioning the Turkish bases, and I believe it was during the morning meeting that they heard that Major Anderson's plane was missing. They still did not know that he had been shot

down. It was not until about one o'clock that they were pretty sure it had been shot down. Do you remember the events of the day?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I don't.

ELLSBERG: That was the first firing that had been done on one of our planes.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Can you remember any details about the reaction that would be worth recording?

YARMOLINSKY: They were meeting in the White House, and I was attending to various odds and ends in the Pentagon.

ELLSBERG: Did you see McNamara's mood?

YARMOLINSKY: I saw him that evening because we lived in the Pentagon. We slept there and John McNaughton and I took turns sleeping in on alternate nights. We ate dinner as well as lunch in the Pentagon.

ELLSBERG: How did McNamara show emotion?

YARMOLINSKY: In expression of concern and in looking grave.

ELLSBERG: Can you remember other occasions in your experience with McNamara when he had shown a good deal of emotion?

YARMOLINSKY: Oh, annoyance about difficulties on the Hill during the course of the TFX or some other hearings.

ELLSBERG: The EXCOM met in the evening and this was after not only Major Anderson had been shot down, but they had fired on several of our other low-flying recon planes.

YARMOLINSKY: Didn't we get the information during the night that several of the freighters were dead in the water?

ELLSBERG: No, that was actually earlier -- on Friday night.

YARMOLINSKY: This was encouraging news. Of course, one of the things that we discovered was that this apparently accurate information about where all the boats were was very inaccurate. Most of them were tramp steamers and they would have reported in several weeks previously. They would have been sighted going through the Black Sea or something, and the predicted arrival at a particular point might be off by several days. So the chart showing all the boats parading across the ocean purporting to have their exact location, until they came within the zone, was a very inaccurate chart.

ELLSBERG: Was this experience in Cuba the first real friction between Anderson and McNamara?

YARMOLINSKY: I don't know.

ELLSBERG: Didn't it leave considerable scars on both sides?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, in my judgment I think it did.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember your reactions on Sunday morning regarding Cuba? Do you remember how you got the news that Khrushchev had capitulated?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I don't. I think I may have gotten it from McNamara.

ELLSBERG: Do you recall his attitude?

YARMOLINSKY: Just exaltation.

ELLSBERG: Very noticeable?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Looking back over the sweep of four years, which included a good many crises of different intensity, would you say that to the principals Cuba seemed extraordinarily different in intensity from other situations?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, definitely so.

ELLSBERG: Much more than during any time in the Berlin crisis?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, although I wasn't as much involved in the Berlin crisis. I was out in Aspen at the time that the Berlin Wall was built.

ELLSBERG: Well, that was not regarded as a crisis.

YARMOLINSKY: No.

ELLSBERG: Apparently by the Administration?

YARMOLINSKY: No.

ELLSBERG: I ask this because so far as the early stages of Cuba were concerned, namely, the period of uncertainty in August and September as to whether they would put missiles in there, and then the earliest indications that they were putting them in, my impression now is that these stages did not differ so much from periods that were reproduced almost every month or so. One result of that is I find that people find it fairly hard to remember that period because it doesn't stand out in their memories.

YARMOLINSKY: My recollection is this was a degree of crisis higher not just in degree, but different in quality because it was so high in degree from any other crisis.

ELLSBERG: I see. Were you involved in the closing out of the Cuban crisis?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, in trying to devise ways to get on-site inspection or to get the equivalent of on-site inspection. One of the suggestions that Fubini made, for instance, was that we should take the electronic signature of the ships without the missiles, and then the electronic signature of the ships with the missiles by low-flying planes. It didn't work because missiles don't have a distinctive electronic signature.

ELLSBERG: You are talking about radar?

YARMOLINSKY: Well, I don't think it is radar. It was a very ingenious technical idea that didn't quite work.

ELLSBERG: This was to see if the ships were carrying missiles?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: Do you remember your own attitudes during the crisis of how you thought it would turn out, and what you thought the West should be doing?

YARMOLINSKY: Well, I was scared.

ELLSBERG: Scared of what?

YARMOLINSKY: Scared of escalation into something worse, maybe a lot worse.

ELLSBERG: Through what process?

YARMOLINSKY: Increase in violence, a response which again increased in violence.

ELLSBERG: I mean specifically. Had you thought through the ways?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I hadn't.

ELLSBERG: As of Saturday, do you remember what your expectation was as to whether we would be knocking out the missiles in the next couple of days?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I didn't really have any expectations one way or the other.

ELLSBERG: Do you think McNamara did?

YARMOLINSKY: No, I think he kept an open mind. I was very much involved in the post-Cuba period in watching over all the utterances that came out of here to see that nothing was said that could get us into political trouble.

ELLSBERG: What could have gotten us into political trouble?

YARMOLINSKY: Well, you remember that McNamara decision to go on nationwide television and show that the missiles had in fact been taken out.

ELLSBERG: Was that a McNamara decision, or did the White House make that decision?

YARMOLINSKY: It was McNamara's decision, with the President's approval. But it was McNamara's initiative. I was away on the day that he made the decision, but then I was involved in helping him prepare for the show, and in the sort of public affairs treatment of the aftermath. You remember Keating said that he knew that missiles were still there and so forth. Senator Keating in fact mis-stated the basic facts on which he based his claims. I think he talked about concrete not having been broken up, and in fact the pads he was talking about didn't have concrete they had gravel which you do not break up, or vice versa. Then there was the great controversy. You remember McNamara said in that TV show that Cuba did not constitute a threat for a center of subversion in the US. He said it because he wanted to put Cuba back in perspective. He was widely criticized for saying it, but he said it really to protect the President, and to try to get back to somewhere near the position we had been in the previous June, before the President made all these commitments.

ELLSBERG: Yes. Do you remember what had led him to have the TV show?

YARMOLINSKY: Because there were so many claims that we hadn't gotten the missiles out.

ELLSBERG: Why did he feel that it was essential to take this step?

YARMOLINSKY: Public confidence in the United States.

ELLSBERG: Did he feel it was a success afterwards?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: A good idea?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, I think he did. It did result in some significant losses in intelligence potential. It told the Russians how much we knew about cratology.

ELLSBERG: It told about the crates.

YARMOLINSKY: Yes, about cratology. What Joe Carroll, Head of CIA calls cratology, and I think he told me they started using different crates.

ELLSBERG: Wasn't there a good deal of resistance by the Intelligence Community to this?

YARMOLINSKY: I'm sure there was, and particularly I think by McCone.

ELLSBERG: There was also the question of organization in there of DOD/DIA doing it rather than CIA?

YARMOLINSKY: Yes.

ELLSBERG: I understand that this was done on very short notice without clearing it with CIA.

YARMOLINSKY: It was done on very short notice. It was cleared with the President. I am sure CIA was involved, but to what extent I do not know.

ELLSBERG: The whole Administration has been criticized for being too willing to use intelligence information for what you would call national objectives, or for political purposes. Did you ever enter into any discussion on that?

YARMOLINSKY: I don't think it comes up in a general context. It's a question in each specific case of whether it's more important to protect the information or to get the results you get by releasing it.

ELLSBERG: Now the point was often made that although the television show was fascinating, many viewers were left with the impression that although there might not be missiles there, they were impressed by how much there was there, which they had now seen more clearly than before; which, to some extent gave a vivid picture of Soviet presence.

YARMOLINSKY: Soviet presence in Cuba.

ELLSBERG: Soviet strength in Cuba.

YARMOLINSKY: I hadn't heard that criticism. Of course it is true.

ELLSBERG: Another aspect is that in looking into this, it is really quite difficult to make what can be called a conclusive case that some missiles were not left behind. In fact, that's very difficult to prove.

YARMOLINSKY: It is difficult to prove.

ELLSBERG: I'm almost surprised in the light of that, that McNamara took that job on so forcefully. He, in effect, involved himself in assertions, which could just possibly have been shown to be wrong.

YARMOLINSKY: True, but he felt that it was politically necessary to do so.

ELLSBERG: What did he think the costs would be of not doing so?

YARMOLINSKY: I suppose deterioration of national unity and public confidence in the Administration.

ELLSBERG: Did you take any part in any of the discussions of what to do if a U-2 were shot down?

YARMOLINSKY: I did discuss it, but I don't remember whether I discussed it before an official or semi-official gathering.

ELLSBERG: Then there was the issue of getting Soviet troops out of

Cuba, and trying to get assurance from Khrushchev that he would do this. Looking back at the Bay of Pigs, you said that McNamara had said that he felt that that hadn't been handled right.

YARMOLINSKY: He never made any statements about it to me. He simply said he wasn't going to talk about it.

ELLSBERG: Do you think he felt very personally involved?

YARMOLINSKY: I think he felt responsible to a degree.

ELLSBERG: Did that leave the scars on him that it did on some others?

YARMOLINSKY: What kind of scars?

ELLSBERG: A feeling that they personally had made grave mistakes.

YARMOLINSKY: I think that it left on these people a feeling that they had, in a sense, been taken in. They had put too much confidence in their staffs, in the professionals, and they wouldn't do that again. They would want to get the facts themselves.